

# Metaphors in Happy and Unhappy Life Stories of Russian Adults

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The present study analyzes metaphors of life, self, emotional states, and relationships in forty life stories that differ in their communicative situations and narrative goals. Twenty interviews were conducted with people who were seeking psychological help. Another twenty interviews were conducted with Russian celebrities for publication in popular psychology magazines. Metaphors in happy stories were more numerous and diverse than in unhappy stories. Some conceptual metaphors (e.g., “*LIFE IS A CONTAINER*,” “*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*,” and “*EMOTION IS A PHYSICAL IMPACT*”) were found in both happy and unhappy narratives. More specific metaphors demonstrated significant differences between the two types of narratives. The metaphors of life as a “*purposeful journey*,” self as “*alive and flexible object*,” and emotional states as “*internal and controlled forces*” were used more often in happy narratives. This may reflect higher levels of activity, responsibility, and awareness of the authors of happy narratives. Specific for unhappy stories were metaphors “*LIFE IS DEATH*” and “*SELF IS A DEAD OBJECT*,” which may indicate a low level of personal well-being and serve as specific markers of personal unhappiness. The results of our study suggest that metaphors may help to construct the subjective reality of happy and unhappy life. By telling their life stories people are able to redefine their past experiences and future perspectives. Specific metaphors play an important part in defining subjective happiness or unhappiness.

Personality can be described in different ways and at different levels. McAdams (1995) distinguishes among the three descriptive levels of (1) dispositional traits; (2) personal concerns; and (3) integrative life stories. Dispositional traits (e.g., extraversion, dominance, neuroticism) show substantial stability over time (McCrae & Costa, 1990; Goldberg, 1993). Personal concerns include motives (McClelland, 1985), values (Rokeach, 1973), defence mechanisms (Cramer, 1991), coping styles (Lazarus, 1991), developmental issues and concerns (Erikson, 1963) and other variables that may change in different situations.

In this article we will concentrate on the third level of personality, narrated texts of life stories. Jerome Bruner (1986) argued that human beings need to be understood as creators of meanings, and that narrative is the process by which this meaning is created. In recent years

several important narrative theories has been developed, including Tomkins's (1987) script theory of personality, the theory of dialogical self developed by Hermans and Kempen (1993), Gregg's (1991) life-narrative approach to ideology and McAdams's (1993, 1996) life-story model of adult identity.

Most narrative theorists believe that a life story is the best way to understand an individual life in time (McIntyre, 1984; Polkinghorne, 1988). Modern people try to make sense of their lives by constructing more or less coherent stories that provide the person with a purposeful self-history (McAdams, 1993). Life stories organize different elements (e.g., setting, scenes, characters, plot, and themes) into temporal sequence (McAdams, 1996).

Gergen (1992) and other social constructionists suggest that a person may have more than one life story, or the overall life story may consist of a collection of disconnected stories about the self. As Polkinghorne suggests, "the self is not a unified whole, but a complex of unintegrated images and events" (1992, p. 149). According to narrative theorists and practitioners Drewery and Winslade (1997), "who people are is a matter of constant contradiction, change, and ongoing struggle" (pp. 38–39). Nevertheless, people seem to seek out opportunities for integrating different autobiographical accounts into a narrated whole, aiming to construct a self that exhibits a unity, coherence, and purpose (Erikson, 1963; Giddens, 1991).

Narrative is widely used in psychotherapy and psychological counseling to help people in organizing their problematic and controversial experiences into coherent life stories (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Stiles, Hones-Webb, & Lani, 1999). The popularity of the narrative in psychotherapy is illustrated by the diversity of narrative formulations in psychodynamic, systemic, cognitive, and constructivist therapies (McLeod, 1997). Common to most of these approaches is the idea that "the task of therapy is to assist clients in revising their old stories and in constructing new ones that have more relevance and meaning for their current and future lives" (Rosen, 1996, p. 24).

## METAPHORS

The language of subjectivity is inherently metaphorical. In creating their life stories people use culturally provided symbols, myths and metaphors. Smith (1991) stresses the role of metaphors in the construction of human self-consciousness. He argues that metaphors people use to understand themselves are intrinsically involved in constructing who they become as persons: "Our metaphors make us who we are" (p. 46).

Despite the significance of metaphors for personal self-awareness, empirical studies on the relationships between metaphors and personality are scarce. One of the first examples is the study of Knapp and Garbutt (1958). They used 25 metaphors of time collected from literature and poetry as stimuli for a semi-projective tool to evaluate people's life attitudes. Participants were asked to rank each metaphor according to its relevance for their general life attitude. In addition, participant's achievement motive was measured by Thematic Apperception Test. In the follow-up study Knapp (1960) used 6 metaphor scales (conscience, time, death, success, love, and self) to measure deep-lying life attitudes. He found two metaphor clusters, one of which included positive self-acceptance (e.g., "*a shaft of light*"), a joyous and victorious success ("*a golden crown*"), and supportive conscience ("*an accurate compass*," "*a secure fortress*"). This cluster corresponded to a positive and healthy life attitude. The second cluster was related to

negative self-presentation (e.g., “*a withered rose*”) and punitive conscience (e.g., “*a hampering burden*”), agonized love (“*a snake on a velvet cushion*”), and cynical images of success (“*a house of cards*”). This cluster corresponded to a negative and pessimistic life attitude.

Psychological practice shows that metaphors people use to describe their experience are very important for their personality integration and self-acceptance. In psychotherapy, metaphors are often used as symbolic tools for organizing emotional experience into coherent and meaningful stories. In contrast to the explanatory language that describes events in the linear succession, the figurative language synthesizes different levels of cognition, emotion and behaviour into an integral image (Papp, 1983). Paul Watzlawick describes “the language of change” as the language of imagination, of metaphors, of symbols, the language of synthesis instead of analysis (Watzlawick, 1978). Joseph Zinker also suggests that metaphors give a structure to isolated parts of personal experience. He uses the term “good form” to refer to a subjective, intuitive and metaphorical goal of the psychotherapeutic activity. Synthesis is much more important than analysis in search for good form (Zinker, 1994). Other authors emphasize that metaphors have an intense emotional colouring, serve as a rich source of information, and represent both a psychological problem of a person and a preferred method of its solution. In contrast to direct methods, finding an appropriate metaphor helps to achieve psychotherapeutic goals in an indirect and less traumatic way (Mills & Crowley, 1986; White, 2006; White & Epston, 1990; Howard, 1991).

## COGNITIVE LINGUISTIC THEORY OF METAPHOR

Since 1980 the cognitive theory of metaphor, first developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their influential book *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), gave birth to a new branch of studies of metaphors in both linguistics and psychology. This approach, referred to as cognitive linguistics, argues that metaphors are not merely figures of speech; they play a much more important role in human experience. Metaphors can structure people’s thoughts, govern their activities, and enable their reasoning from the familiar to the unfamiliar (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). Contemporary research in cognitive linguistics suggests that people speak metaphorically because they think, feel, and act metaphorically: “We actually understand the world with metaphors and do not just speak with them” (Kövecses, 2005, p. 2).

According to the cognitive theory of metaphor, verbal metaphors, including conventional expressions based on metaphor, reflect underlying conceptual metaphors in which people conceptualize vague, abstract domains of knowledge (such as time, causation, spatial orientation, ideas, and emotions) in terms of more specific, familiar, and concrete knowledge (Gibbs, 1994). Human conceptual system is structured around a small set of experiential concepts (“front/back,” “up/down,” “entity,” “container,” etc.). Concepts that do not emerge directly out of physical experience are metaphoric in nature. Human thinking is organized from simple to complex, and the basic, predominantly bodily experience (source domain) is used to understand more abstract constructs (target domain; e.g., life, love, justice, etc.). For example, “orientational” metaphors, such as “*MORE IS UP/LESS IS DOWN*”; “*HAPPY IS UP/SAD IS DOWN*,” emphasize the importance of the up/down source domain. “Ontological” metaphors (e.g., “*LIFE IS A CONTAINER*”) help to separate parts of human experience from a broader historical context as something distinct. “Structural” metaphors can describe a phenomenon in more detail. For example, the metaphor

“*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*” can be used to describe a traveller, his itinerary, ascents and descents, turns, danger areas, navigational instruments, and so on.

In the present study we focus on metaphors of life, self, emotional states, and relations, which are of particular importance for a psychological well-being of a person. Below we discuss these metaphors in more detail.

### Metaphors of Life

Lakoff and Johnson considered metaphors of life (e.g., “*LIFE IS A CONTAINER*,” “*LIFE IS A GAME*,” and “*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*”) as universal to human thinking. For example, the metaphor “*LIFE IS A BUILDING*” exists in English, Japanese, Tunisian Arabic and Brazilian Portuguese (Kövecses, 2005). It is also quite common in Russian (“*Его жизнь рухнула*” / “*His life collapsed*”). The metaphor “*LIFE IS A STRING*” (that can be cut and broken) is used not only in Mediterranean mythology, but also in the Hmong language, spoken in Laos and Thailand (Riddle, 2000).

Yet, not all metaphors of life seem to be universal across languages; at least not all of them are used with the same frequency. For example, comparing life metaphors of Americans and Hungarians, Köves (2002) has demonstrated that Americans most often describe life (in the order of ranking) as: *precious possession, game, journey, container, gamble, compromise, experiment, test, war, and play*. The most common Hungarian metaphors of life include: *struggle/war* (the most popular metaphor), followed by *compromise, journey, gift, possibility, puzzle, labyrinth, game, freedom, and challenge* (the least common).

Commenting on the U.S. media coverage of Iraqi war, Kövecses (2005) pointed to the prevalence of the conceptual metaphor “*LIFE IS A GAME*” in media discourse: “It seems that Americans [. . .] understand their various experiences in life, including business, politics, education, love, dating, and warfare, in terms of a show, or entertainment. [. . .] Life does become a play, a kind of entertainment, and we as spectators watch ourselves living our own lives” (p. 188–189).

### Metaphors of Self

Lakoff and Johnson distinguish five metaphors of self: (1) the “*PHYSICAL OBJECT SELF*” metaphor (“*You have to take a grip on yourself*”); (2) the “*LOCATIONAL SELF*” metaphor (“*He is beside himself with rage*”); (3) the “*SOCIAL SELF*” metaphor (“*He is struggling with himself over whether to marry his girlfriend,*” “*She likes to pamper herself,*” or “*I promised myself a vacation*”); (4) the “*MULTIPLE SELVES*” metaphor (“*Now I have to choose between the wife and the business-woman in me*”); and (5) the “*ESSENTIAL SELF*” metaphor (“*She can’t find herself since her children have grown up*”; Kövecses, 2005, p. 54).

Larsen and Larsen (2004) studied how adolescents describe self through the construction of metaphors. They revealed three metaphorical themes: (a) “*MULTIPLE SELF*” (“*I am a puzzle where none of the pieces are the same*”); (b) “*SELF AS A COMPLEX*” (“*I am a book of poems,*” “*I am a sophisticated piece of work*”); and (c) “*EMBODIED HOPE*” (“*I am a flower that continuously grows and flourishes,*” “*I am a gold ring,*” “*I am a star,*” “*I am a pond full of life and excitement*”).

## Metaphors of Emotional States

Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and later Kövecses (2000) discuss a set of metaphors common to many emotional states: “ENTITIES WITHIN A PERSON” (“*Her pains went away*”); “CONTAINERS” or “LOCATIONS” (“*He entered a state of euphoria,*” “*He fell in love*”); “PHYSICAL OBJECTS” (“*He is depressed*”); “FORCES” (“*I could feel electricity between us*”); or “ACTIVITIES”, including “LOVE IS A JOURNEY” (“*This relationship is a dead-end street,*” “*We can’t turn back now*”). A number of metaphors are specific to particular emotions, such as, “FEAR IS A HIDDEN ENEMY,” “HAPPINESS IS BEING OFF THE GROUND,” “SHAME IS HAVING NO CLOTHES ON,” “THE ANGRY PERSON IS A PRESSURIZED CONTAINER” (“*Let him stew,*” “*He blew his top*”; Kövecses, 2000). Except English, the latter metaphor was found in Chinese (King, 1989; Yu, 1995), Japanese (Matsuki, 1995), Hungarian (Bokor, 1997), Wolof (Kövecses, 2005), Zulu (Taylor & Mbense, 1998), and Polish (Micholajczuk, 1998). This metaphor is also quite common in Russian (“*Его переполняет гнев*” / “*His anger overcrowds him*”).

Analysing interviews with 21 patients diagnosed with depression, McMullen and Conway (2002) have found four main metaphors: (1) “DEPRESSION IS DARKNESS” (“*It’s really like a black cloud*”); (2) “DEPRESSION IS WEIGHT” (“*I felt just so – so heavy*”); (3) “DEPRESSION IS A CAPTOR” (“*I want to break out of this*”); and (4) “DEPRESSION IS DESCENT” (“*I just was down*”). Three of these metaphors overlap with the conventional metaphors for sadness identified by Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and Barcelona (1986) in the common language use (“*SAD IS DARK,*” “*SAD IS HEAVY,*” and “*SAD IS DOWN*”). But in the clinical context 90% of the studied metaphorical expressions were variants of the “DEPRESSION IS DESCENT” conceptual metaphor. In addition, a new metaphor of a “CAPTOR” was found that had not been discussed earlier.

## Metaphors of Relationships

The most common metaphors people use to describe their relationships include the following: “SHARING (EXPERIENCE/OBJECTS),” “DISTANCE (CLOSE/DISTANT),” “WARMTH,” “BOND,” “ECONOMIC EXCHANGE,” “BUILDING,” “IMPLEMENT,” “MACHINE,” “PLANT,” “JOURNEY,” “VALUABLE COMMODITY” (Kövecses, 2005). These metaphors characterize various details of dynamics, complexity, closeness, solidity and other characteristics of relationships. In addition, there are many conceptual metaphors of particular forms of relationship, especially of love: “LOVE IS MADNESS,” “LOVE IS A PHYSICAL FORCE,” “LOVE IS A WAR,” “LOVE IS MAGIC” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). The majority of these metaphors are also widely used in Russian.

## PRESENT STUDY

What are the differences between thinking about your own life as happy or unhappy? What are the main metaphors that organize this thinking? We suppose that there might be substantial differences in metaphors that construct a positive and a negative assessment of a person’s life.

In the present study we analyse happy and unhappy stories of Russian adults to find out whether they use different metaphors in their life stories.

In the book *Metaphor in Culture: Universality and Variation*, Kövecses (2005) discusses whether style variables such as communicative setting, subject matter, medium, and audience can influence metaphors people use. He assumes that “the factors of style would reveal many interesting peculiarities of metaphorical language and thought” (p. 97). Johnson and Lakoff (2002) also suggest that situational factors may influence human experience: “How a person frames a particular situation will determine what they experience as relevant phenomena, what they count as data, what inferences they make about the situation, and how they conceptualize it” (p. 246).

In the present study we look into specific metaphors people use in two types of life stories that differ in both communicative situation and conversational goals: (1) when people complain about their life misfortunes and emphasise their distress and suffering; and (2) when they proudly talk about their achievements and life success. We are wondering if any style differences may be found in the use of metaphors in these two communicative situations.

In the present study we test an assumption that metaphors used in “happy” and “unhappy” autobiographical narratives may be significantly different. The authors of “happy stories” may demonstrate more flexible and creative life attitudes, which might result in higher quantity and variety of metaphors in their narratives. Metaphors may also reflect active or passive life attitudes that characterize the authors of happy and unhappy life stories. We analysed empirical data to test the following hypotheses:

1. The number of metaphors in happy stories is higher than in unhappy stories.
2. Metaphors in happy stories are more variable than in unhappy stories.
3. Metaphors in happy stories reflect the higher level of authors’ activity, responsibility, and positive thinking than metaphors in unhappy stories.

## Methods

*Participants.* Authors of “happy” and “unhappy” narratives were 40 adults, 4 men and 16 women in each group, age from 21 to 53 years old (median is 37). More details on educational level and occupation of the respondents are given in Table 1.

Twenty interviews were conducted by one of the authors with people who were seeking psychological help. The goal of the interviews was to establish their clinical status and the urgency of their need for counselling. Another 20 interviews were conducted with Russian celebrities by journalists of popular psychology magazines such as *Psychologies*. The main goal of these interviews was to tell success stories of celebrities and to show role models for the magazine readers.

We have chosen these two samples because they clearly demonstrate two opposite life attitudes. The downside of this choice is that the data do not reflect objective assessment of well-being of the two groups. Another problem is that interviews with celebrities were edited for publication, and some of the metaphors might be added by journalists. Still, we decided to compare these two samples because we were interested not in the “real” well-being of the authors of happy and unhappy narratives, but in the contextual use of metaphors in two different conversational situations. Our approach is based on the theory of social constructivism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), which suggests that the reality is constructed by social interactions,

TABLE 1  
Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Sex</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Education</i>
Authors of unhappy stories (N = 20)			
Doctor	F	34	Professional degree
Fitness instructor	F	43	Professional degree
Lecturer	F	50	Professional degree
Paramedic	M	26	Associate's degree
Nurse	F	38	Professional degree
Librarian	F	41	Professional degree
Lecturer in social work	F	33	Professional degree
Teacher	F	53	Professional degree
Clerk	M	28	Some college, no degree
Entrepreneur	F	33	Professional degree
Baggage agent	F	36	Some college, no degree
Technologist	F	38	Associate's degree
Builder	M	42	Professional degree
Student	F	21	Some college, no degree
Actor	F	27	Professional degree
Actor	F	31	Professional degree
Actor	M	33	Professional degree
House worker	F	40	Associate's degree
House worker	F	49	Professional degree
House worker	F	37	College
Authors of happy stories (N = 20)			
Doctor	F	38	Professional degree
Gymnast	F	27	PhD
Broadcaster	F	37	Professional degree
Figure-skater	M	43	Associate's degree
Basketball player	M	25	Associate's degree
Politician	F	43	Professional degree
Broadcaster	F	33	Professional degree
Broadcaster	F	35	Professional degree
Entrepreneur	M	34	Professional degree
Entrepreneur	F	44	Professional degree
Singer	F	43	Professional degree
Entrepreneur	F	43	Professional degree
Actor	F	31	Professional degree
Actor	F	34	Professional degree
Actor	F	45	Professional degree
Actor	F	47	Professional degree
Actor	M	26	Associate's degree
House worker	F	45	Professional degree
House worker	F	33	Professional degree
House worker	F	43	Professional degree

including everyday conversations and socially organized narrative. Individuals may have more than one life story; personal representations of life depend on the situation and narrative context. Conversation is one of the ways to construct and reinforce subjective reality and personal identity. We see celebrity interview and psychotherapeutic interview as two types of socially organized

conversations that help to construct happy and unhappy personal identity. Even if some of the metaphors used in the published “happy” stories were not authentic but were added by journalists, they were still part of the socially accepted ‘happy narrative’ that helps to reinforce subjective reality of life success.

## Procedure and Analysis

Forty semi-structural biographical interviews (each about 2,000 words) transcribed verbatim were analyzed. The question list included the following topics: (1) present emotions, interests, energy level; (2) past (childhood, relationship in the parent family, adolescence, traumas, significant others, important events); (3) future (plans, dreams, goals, strategies, expectations and fears); (4) important events and experiences; (5) relationships with significant others (love, family, friendship); (6) self-realization (job, education, hobby); (7) successes and misfortunes; and (8) reasoning about causal relations between events and “laws of life” in general.

The content analysis of 40 texts of biographic interviews was used (Holsti, 1969). At the first stage we selected the following four categories of analysis as the main target domains for metaphors: (1) “*LIFE*”; (2) “*SELF*”; (3) “*EMOTIONAL STATES*”; and (4) “*RELATIONSHIPS*.” These categories were chosen because they represent the typical topics of personal life dissatisfaction that are most often discussed in the context of psychological counselling. The “*LIFE*” category includes the topics of life satisfaction, integration of personal experience, life attitudes, acceptance of the past, planning, expectations for the future, life decisions, and choices. The “*SELF*” contains the descriptions of self-esteem, self-actualization, image of self, and self-sentiment. The “*EMOTIONAL STATES*” category contains images of emotions, mental states, bodily experience, emotional and bodily self-regulation. The “*RELATIONSHIPS*” category includes metaphors of social roles, interpersonal relationships and their dynamics. These four metaphor categories cover the main problem fields of the personal life dissatisfaction.

At the second stage, three judges independently analyzed the texts to find metaphors that fit into categories identified above. They followed the standard definition of metaphor as a figure of speech that uses the name of the object referred to the one class for description of the object referred to the other class. They were instructed not to select (1) words used in their literal sense (non-metaphors); (2) metaphors that were not referred to the author, but were used to characterize someone else; and (3) metonymies. Metonymies are very close to the metaphors, and sometimes it is hard to distinguish them. We defined metonymy as a figure of speech where the object is replaced by the other one that has some relation (spatial, temporal, etc.) with the first one.

The results of three analyses were compared and all words or phrases that were selected as metaphorical by at least two of the three judges were accepted for analysis. Metaphors that were excluded from the further analysis were mostly descriptions of *other* people (children, marriage partners etc.), or described some hypothetical events, for example, “*The darkest possible action may be a good for somebody*” (“*Самый черный поступок может оказаться для кого-то благом*”). Out of 80,000 words, 606 metaphors were selected.

At the third stage the judges classified the metaphors they found into a number of sets. All judges were acquainted with the conceptual metaphors described by Lakoff and Johnson, and they tended to use their terminology in categorizing the groups of metaphors and mapping of the



conceptual metaphors. For instance, metaphors related to motion, routes, modes of transportation, and direction of the journey were grouped into the set “*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*”. The set “*LIFE IS A CONTAINER*” included phrases like “*There are no events in my life*” (“*Ничего в моей жизни не происходит*”) or “*You need to find your place in life*” (“*Находишь свое место в жизни*”). In addition to conceptual metaphors described in the literature, some new sets emerged from the analysis. Metaphors were placed into one set on the basis of the semantic similarity of the source domain. For instance, “*I am falling to the bottom*” (“*Я падаю на дно*”) and “*This is a dead-end*” (“*Это тупик*”) were placed into the “*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*” set, whereas “*I am losing it*” (“*Я проигрываю*”) were placed into “*LIFE IS A GAME*” set.

After individual analyses were completed, the judges discussed their metaphor sets to come to the mutual agreement. Some of the biggest sets were further differentiated into several subsets. Some of the sets were found only in happy narratives, while others were found only in unhappy narratives. For instance, in the subcategory “*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*” three sets were found only in happy narratives: “*Purposeful movement*” (“*not just to go with the stream, but to live with a sense*” – “*не просто плыть по течению, а жить со смыслом*”), “*Difficulties on the road*” (“*Since this moment my life changed its watercourse*” – “*жизнь моя с этого момента потекла по совершенно иному руслу*”), and “*End of the journey*” (“*there beyond the border*” – “*там, за гранью*”). And vice versa, the set “*Dead-end*” (“*I reached the dead-end*” – “*зашла в тупик*”) was specific for unhappy metaphors.

The Mann-Whitney *U* Test for independent samples was used to compare frequencies of different metaphor sets in happy and unhappy life stories. This test is widely used non-parametric significance test that allows assessing whether two independent samples of observations in nominative scales come from the same distribution (Conover, 1980).

## RESULTS

As we expected, the authors of unhappy stories whose goal was to get a psychological treatment, predominantly discussed their psychological difficulties, personal failures and the overall life dissatisfaction; the authors of happy stories emphasized their personal satisfaction, life success, and an experience of overcoming obstacles.

In total 606 metaphors (245 in unhappy narratives and 361 in happy ones) were found (see Figure 1). Happy stories were metaphorically richer than unhappy stories: they contained 32% more metaphors in the same amount of text. Classification of metaphors within narrative themes yielded nine sets of life metaphors, three sets of self metaphors, four sets of emotional metaphors, and nine sets of relationship metaphors.

### Metaphors of Life

Significant differences were found between happy and unhappy metaphors of life (Table 2). First, the authors of happy stories significantly more often described their life as a “*CONTAINER*” (Mann-Whitney  $U = 103.5$ ,  $n_1 = n_2 = 20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed). Possibly, they have more clear life borders (temporal and spatial), which makes it easier for them to understand what is “inside” and “outside” of their life: “*I am completely immersed in my life*” (“*Я погружена в свою*

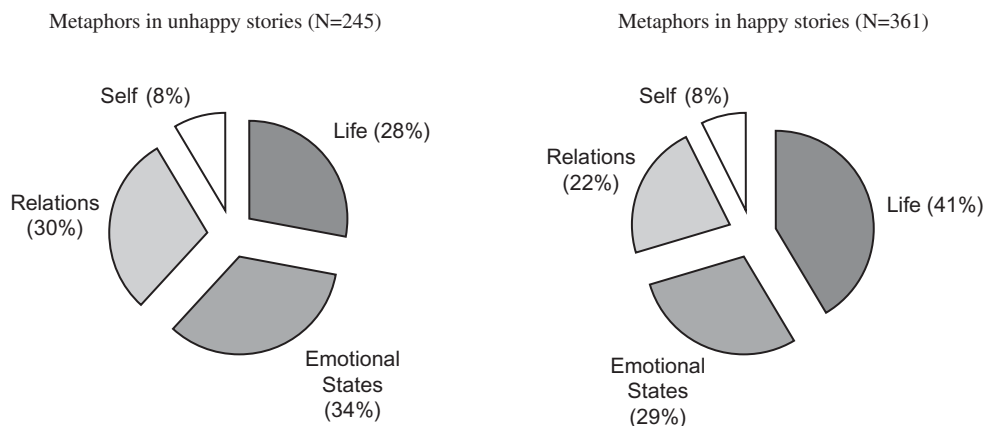


FIGURE 1 Metaphors in unhappy and happy narratives.

жизнь”), “*To find your place in life*” (“*Находить свое место в жизни*”). For the authors of unhappy stories these borders are vague; life and death, life and non-life are mixed, so the container metaphor is not relevant for them. The only exception is: “*Nothing happens in my life*” (“*Ничего в моей жизни не происходит*”).

Second, the conceptual metaphor “*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*” was the most frequent in both groups of narratives, but it was significantly more frequent in happy narratives (Mann–Whitney  $U = 113$ ,  $n_1 = n_2 = 20$ ,  $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed). It was analysed further to look at the more specific differences between two types of narratives. Seven subsets of this metaphor were identified by the judges, some of which showed significant differences in two types of stories (see Table 3 for complete statistics). The authors of unhappy stories significantly more often described their life situation as *a dead-end*: “*It is getting me in a deadlock*” (“*Это заводит меня в тупик*”), “*I was staying on the verge of a disaster*” (“*Я стояла на краю пропасти*”). This set was specific for unhappy stories (there were no examples of it in happy stories). The authors of happy stories significantly more often specified *a mode of motion*: “*To run in front of a locomotive*” (“*Встать впереди паровоза и бежать*”); “*A huge jump*” (“*Очень большой скачок*”), *difficulties* and *obstacles* in their journey: “*I’ve overstepped myself*” (“*Я переступила через себя*”); “*From this moment, my life completely changed its course*” (“*Жизнь моя с этого момента потекла по совершенно иному руслу*”); and its *purpose*: “*My way to freedom was long*” (“*Я долго шла к свободе*”); “*You should figure out where to go*” (“*Нужно придумать, куда идти*”). The subsets of “*purposeful movement*,” “*difficulties on the road*,” and “*the end of the life journey*” were specific for happy narratives.

The authors of unhappy narratives often used the metaphor “*LIFE IS DEATH*,” which was almost absent in happy narratives. Although the difference between two samples did not reach statistical significance (because of the small number of cases), we believe that this metaphor is very important. It can serve as a specific marker of an unhappy story; the metaphors such as “*My life is finished*” (“*Моя жизнь кончилась*”), “*I’m not living my own life*” (“*Я не живу своей жизнью*”) point to the low level of a personal well-being. The only two metaphors in this set which were found in happy stories described not an actual, but a hypothetical situation: “*When*

TABLE 2  
Categories of Metaphors in Happy and Unhappy Life Stories

	<i>Happy Stories (N=20)</i>	<i>Unhappy Stories (N=20)</i>	<i>U</i>
Metaphors of life (N = 217)			
Journey	78	35	113*
Container	15	2	103.5**
War	13	2	166
Production	13	3	147
Internal schedule	10	3	157
Building	7	1	159
Separate world	7	4	194
Game	4	3	199
Death	2	15	150
Metaphors of self (N = 48)			
Living creature	15	5	136.5*
Finding hidden object	11	8	187
Lifeless object	1	8	139.5
Metaphors of emotional states (N = 189)			
Physical impact	68	65	186
Container	21	13	129*
Substance	14	2	127*
Machinery	3	3	200
Metaphors of relationship (N = 134)			
Physical contact	24	33	163,5
Journey	14	9	188
Container	7	6	196
Fight/struggle	7	6	181,5
Music	7	2	150
Building	6	9	171,5
Communication	6	5	197,5
Illness	5	1	169,5
Work	3	2	190

*Note.* \*\*The differences are significant at 1% level ( $p < 0.01$  two-tailed); \*at 5% level ( $p < 0.05$  two-tailed).

*you have a dead point in your life, you should cut it off*” (“Когда возникает мертвая точка в жизни, ее обязательно надо обрубать”), and “*You need to get out of a trap when you fall into it*” (“Нужно выбраться из мертвой петли, которая образовалась”).

In sum, the metaphors of life in happy stories were more detailed, contained more aspects and were more integral than metaphors in unhappy stories. Within the conceptual metaphor “*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*,” happy stories revealed more differentiated life course, which contained the mode of movement and the point of destination. In unhappy narratives life was described mainly as a dangerous, purposeless and uncontrolled journey without clear start and finish.

### Metaphors of Self

The analysis yielded three clusters of metaphors of self, including (1) the *self loss/finding process*; (2) a *living creature*; and (3) a *lifeless object* (Table 2). The authors of unhappy

TABLE 3  
Subcategories of Metaphors in Happy and Unhappy Life Stories

	<i>Happy Stories (N = 20)</i>	<i>Unhappy Stories (N = 20)</i>	<i>U</i>
"Life is a journey" (N = 113)			
Mode of motion	35	9	108.5**
Purposeful movement	19	0	110**
Difficulties on the road	9	0	130*
Uncontrolled movement	7	9	165
Need to move	4	10	150
End of the journey	4	0	180
Dead-end	0	7	134*
"Emotional state is a physical impact" (N=132)			
Pressure	17	11	160
Contact of the body	17	13	199,5
Natural forces	9	35	119*
Somatic feeling	9	0	130*
Internal struggle	7	0	150
Gustatory sense	6	0	140
Keeping oneself in hand	2	6	160
"Relationship is a physical contact" (N = 58)			
Friction	10	6	176
Support	6	5	198
Pressure	4	9	177,5
Thread	3	8	158,5
Elements	1	0	190
Temperature	0	6	150

Note.\*\*The differences are significant at 1% level ( $p < 0.01$  two-tailed); \*at 5% level ( $p < 0.05$  two-tailed).

narratives more often described themselves as *lifeless objects*, such as "I am a frozen fish" ("Я — мороженная рыба"); "I am a used mop cloth" ("Я выжатая половая тряпка"); or "I am lying at home like a corpse" ("Лежу дома как труп"). And vice versa, the authors of happy stories significantly more often used images of *living creatures*: "Poor child in the toy store" ("Бедный ребенок в магазине игрушек"); "We are like the branches of a tree" ("Мы все как ветви одного дерева"); "I am 'A Man of the World': I don't belong to any town" ("Человек мира, не принадлежу ни одному городу"); and "Weird character" ("Странный персонаж";  $U = 136.5$ ,  $n_1 = n_2 = 20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). This corresponds to the metaphor "Life is death": when somebody describes himself as a "corpse" or a "frozen fish," it is a clear indication of personal dissatisfaction. The process of finding the self was equally important in both types of stories.

### Metaphors of Emotional States

The analysis of emotional metaphors showed that the metaphors of a "CONTAINER" ( $U = 129$ ,  $n_1 = n_2 = 20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) and a "SUBSTANCE" ( $U = 127$ ,  $n_1 = n_2 = 20$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) were used significantly more often in happy narratives (see Table 2): "To be full of impressions"

(“Набрался впечатлений”); “To throw away garbage from memory” (“Выкидывать грязь из памяти”); “To give away a big amount of love” (“Дать большое количество любви”). These ontological metaphors help to separate mental states from the outside world. Probably, they were used less often by the authors of unhappy stories, because it was more difficult for them to recognize their emotions and to be aware of their mental states.

The metaphor of “*PHYSICAL IMPACT*” was the most frequent in both types of stories. It was further differentiated into seven subsets (see Table 3 for exact statistics). The metaphor of “*NATURAL FORCES*” (strong, uncontrolled, and independent of personal will) was used more often in unhappy stories. The authors of this stories experienced emotional states as something dangerous, uncontrolled and separate from the person: “*Aggression overflows with shouting; you can sink in this aggression*” (“Агрессия выливается через крики, и в этой агрессии можно утонуть”). Metaphors of “*somatic feelings*” (“*The sense of fear and danger became blunt*” – “Ощущение страха и опасности притупилось”); “*internal struggle*” (“*You should overwhelm it inside yourself*” - “Нужно преодолеть это внутри себя”); and “*gustatory sensations*” (“*The thoughts were acid*” – “Мысли были кислые”) were used exclusively in happy narratives. This may suggest that the authors of happy stories were more aware of their bodily experience and were able to recognize, localize, and differentiate their emotions better than the authors of unhappy stories.

Overall, metaphors in unhappy narratives show the external localization of affective experiences and the lack of control over them, whereas metaphors in happy narratives suggest more differentiation, awareness and control over emotional states.

### Metaphors of Relationship

Metaphors of relationships were divided in 9 clusters (see Table 2). Surprisingly, there were no significant differences between two types of stories. The most frequent metaphor “*RELATIONSHIP IS A PHYSICAL CONTACT*” was further divided it into six subsets (see Table 2). Only one significant difference was found within this subset: the “*TEMPERATURE*” metaphor (“*WARM/COLD*”) was mentioned more often in unhappy stories (“*Warm relationship*” - “Теплые отношения”; “*To extinguish the conflict*” - “Загасить конфликт”). This result may suggest that the “*temperature*” of the relationships (as an indicator of an emotional support) is more important for the authors of unhappy stories.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study aimed to find out if any differences exist between metaphors used in life stories that differ in their communicative situations and goals. We tested three empirical hypotheses: (1) The number of metaphors in happy stories is higher than in unhappy stories; (2) Metaphors in happy stories are more variable than in unhappy stories; and (3) Metaphors in happy stories reflect the higher level of authors’ activity, responsibility, and positive thinking than metaphors in unhappy stories. All three hypotheses were confirmed. The results show that the metaphors in happy in unhappy discourses are, indeed, different in several aspects.

First of all, happy life stories are richer than unhappy stories in the amount of metaphors and their variety. This may suggest that that happy life stories are more complex and detailed than unhappy ones. Indeed, every happy life story also includes elements of unhappy stories, but the elements of happy stories are absent from unhappy discourse.

Second, the authors of happy stories demonstrate higher levels of activity, responsibility and awareness in their life. These characteristics are reflected in metaphors of life as a purposeful journey, self as alive and flexible object, and emotional states as internal and controlled forces. Specific for unhappy stories are the metaphors “*LIFE IS DEATH*” and “*SELF IS A DEAD OBJECT*.” Metaphors such as “*My life is finished*” or “*I am a frozen fish*” clearly demonstrate the low level of personal well-being of the author. They can serve as the specific markers of personal unhappiness.

Some metaphors were repeated several times in one narrative, which may indicate a special importance of certain topics for their authors. For instance, the “agricultural” metaphors were used several times in one of the happy stories: “*You have to seed your gifts, not to bury them*” (“*Данное мне я должна вернуть с лихвой, а не закопать в землю*”); “*If you don’t plough the land, you won’t gather a harvest*” (“*Если ты как следует поле не вспашешь, на нем ничего не вырастет*”); and “*Deep thoughts fall into your consciousness and grow sooner or later*” (“*Глубокие вещи обязательно западают в сознание и рано или поздно прорастают*”). In one of the unhappy stories metaphors of death and inanimate objects were used repeatedly. A person described her life as “*living in hell*” (“*Жила в аду*”), she described herself as “*a crushed floor cloth*” (“*Выжатая половая тряпка*”) and she asked “*How to rise from the dead?*” (“*Как возродиться к жизни?*”). These examples suggest that metaphors people use in their autobiographical narratives are consistent and interdependent.

Our analysis demonstrates that metaphors people use in their life narratives reflect their level of personal well-being and life satisfaction. The question then arises: do these differences in metaphors result from individual and situational differences, or can they also influence or even construct (as the cognitive linguistic theory of metaphor suggests) positive and negative concepts of life, self, and emotional states? The answer to this question depends on how the metaphor is conceptualized and how its role in human thinking is understood.

### Embodied Experience and Cultural Diversity

There are continuing debates over the nature of metaphors and their psychological reality (Hampe, 2006). Most of cognitive linguists assume that conceptual metaphors are explicit abstract representations of embodied cognitive structures. According to Lakoff and Johnson (1999), conceptual metaphors (such as “*POSITIVE IS UP*,” “*NEGATIVE IS DOWN*”) could be established as people implicitly learn associations between physical experiences and emotional states that typically co-occur. Social psychological studies have been interpreted as supporting this theory (Barsalou et al., 2003). Participants perform better and produce more positive evaluations on various tasks when they assume upright body postures in an experimental setting that are similar to the postures people assume spontaneously when they are feeling good in their everyday lives. In one experiment, participants persisted longer in a puzzle-solving task after assuming an upright posture as opposed to a slouching posture (Riskind & Gotay, 1982), and in another

one, participants expressed more pride in their test performance after sitting upright during the experiment than after slouching (Stepper & Strack, 1993).

Recently, Williams and Bargh (2008) have investigated one of the conceptual metaphors, "*FRIENDLY IS WARM*," which represents one of the universal dimensions of social cognition. They have demonstrated that people who had just briefly held a hot cup of coffee, perceived a target person as being significantly "warmer" (more friendly) than those who had briefly held a cup of iced coffee. In addition, participants primed with physical coldness were more likely to choose a gift for themselves rather than a gift for a friend as a reward for participating in the study, whereas those primed with physical warmth were more likely to choose a gift for a friend. The authors argue that because of frequent early life experiences with the loving family members (e.g., Harlow, 1958; Bowlby, 1969) a close mental association may develop between the concepts of physical warmth and psychological warmth.

Other scholars suggest that conceptual metaphors are not merely representative of universal body experience, but are tied to specific socio-cultural cognition (Kimmel, 2006; Zlatev, 2006). Metaphors could be learned from patterns in language and culture; they are not necessarily "embodied" (Boroditsky, 2000; Gentner, Bowdle, Wolff, & Boronat, 2001). Metaphors in language can precede concepts in an individual learner; new conceptual links can be created via learning processes that are not directly grounded in physical experience (Carey, 2004; Dehaene, Bossini, & Giraux, 1993). Even if direct bodily experience is necessary on the timescale of biological or cultural/linguistic evolution, it may not be necessary on the timescale of conceptual development of an individual (Tomasello, 2003; Vygotsky, 1986).

Those scholars, who believe that conceptual metaphors originate from bodily experience, emphasise universality of metaphorical thinking, because physiological structure of the body is universal for all human beings. Those, who understand metaphors as products of cultural learning, stress cultural and linguistic differences between metaphors.

Kövecses (2005) distinguishes between universal metaphors that are rooted in the universal bodily experience (such as "*ANGRY PERSON IS A PRESSURIZED CONTAINER*") and conventional metaphors that vary across cultural, social, regional, style, developmental and other dimensions. He tries to explain individual variations in metaphors by the differences in early life experiences of a person. Kövecses refers to psychoanalytical ideas of the importance of early childhood experiences for a psychological well-being of an adult and conceptualizes these early experiences as source domains for later experiences: "Because these experiences differ from person to person, we get a large number of, in our terms, unconventional source domains to conceptualize ourselves and our mental and emotional conditions. If this is true, we can regard a large part of the therapeutic and analytic interview as an attempt to recover a source domain (i.e., a coherent knowledge structure that makes sense of a problem), together with its appropriate target domain (the problem itself)" (p. 109).

Pritzker (2007) studied "*HEART*" and "*BRAIN*" metaphors used in spontaneous narratives of Chinese individuals diagnosed with depression. A total of 92% of participants used metaphors of "*HEART*" to express both thinking and feeling; 37% also used "*BRAIN*" metaphors to express both thinking and feeling. The use of "*BRAIN*" metaphors did not corresponded to being younger, more urban, or more prone to choose western medicine over traditional medicine. These results suggest that, within specific culture, the use of metaphors is flexible; people can chose various metaphors for understanding and expressing their experience.

## Metaphors as Self-fulfilling Prophecies

Our data illustrate both universality and variety of metaphors of personal narratives. On the one hand, conceptual metaphors described by cognitive linguistics (e.g., “*LIFE IS A CONTAINER*,” “*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*,” and “*EMOTION IS A PHYSICAL IMPACT*”) were found in both happy and unhappy narratives. On the other hand, we also discovered significant differences in the use of specific metaphors between the two types of narratives. We believe that these differences reflect cognitive processes which may influence emotional well-being of a person, and that our findings can help in diagnostics and treatment of psychological problems.

Psychotherapeutic theories of personality, especially the psychoanalytical approach, are often accused of being “merely” metaphorical. But some scholars suggest that, irrespective of the lack of scientific rigour and validity, psychotherapeutic metaphors can influence the content of selfhood of modern people. For example, Smith (1985) argues that Freudian institutions of personality (*Ego*, *Id*, and *Superego*) and Jungian archetypes (*Anima*, *Animus*, *Self*, etc.) are constructive metaphors that may play an important role in the transformation of the selfhood. “The content of selfhood has its historical origins and partakes of symbolic culture. It takes different shapes in different cultures, and is changing even today, in part under the impact of scientific psychology” (Smith, 1985, pp. 44-45).

Metaphors work as self-fulfilling prophesies. That is why metaphors, along with other symbolic tools (e.g., tales, stories, painting, and active imagination), are widely used in psychotherapy to help clients achieve higher levels of well-being, life integration, and self-acceptance. Our data suggest that changing metaphors from “dead” to “alive” and from “uncontrolled” to “controlled” can help people to restore their self-acceptance and increase their life satisfaction. As Carl Jung writes, “He [man] can stand the most incredible hardships when he is convinced that they make sense; he is crushed when, on top of all his misfortunes, he has to admit that he is taking a part in a ‘tale told by an idiot’” (Jung, 1968, p. 76).

## Pragmatic Functions of Narratives

The differences in metaphors found in our study can be also attributed to different communicational situations and pragmatic functions of narratives. Gergen (1998) isolates three basic narrative forms: Stability, Progressive, and Regressive. The Stability narrative links events in such a way that the outcome or the goal remains essentially unchanged. Life simply goes on, neither better nor worse. The Progressive narrative is the optimistic account of life, ever better in every way (“*I am really learning to overcome my shyness and be more open and friendly with people*”). The regressive narrative depicts a continued downward slide (“*I can’t seem to control the events in my life anymore*,” “*It’s been one series of catastrophes after another*”). The Stability narrative functions as a proof that one’s love, parental commitment, honesty, or moral ideals have been unflinching over time. The Progressive narrative plays an important role in social relationships, especially in early stages; it is mainly used to make a promise for the future. The aim of Regressive narratives is to solicit attention, sympathy, and concern, or excuse oneself from failure.

In Gergen’s terminology, happy life story can be conceptualised as Progressive narrative, while unhappy story as Regressive narrative. From this perspective, differences in metaphors



found in happy and unhappy narratives may result from the different pragmatic functions of two types of narratives. Indeed, the main goal of an unhappy narrative was to get psychological help, while the goal of a happy narrative was to share the author's success and to gain respect and admiration.

### Perspectives for Future Research

One of the limitations of the present study is that happy and unhappy stories were told in two different situations by two different groups of participants. This does not allow differentiating between the situational effects and the effects of individual differences in metaphorical style, which might be stable over time and linked to other relatively stable characteristics of personality (such as cognitive style, extraversion, self-esteem, etc.). Different approaches can be used in future research to differentiate between the effects of narrative situation and personal metaphorical style.

First, research can compare life stories produced by the same participants in different situations (for example, in a situation of applying for a social subsidy versus a situation of applying for a high job position). This would allow finding out whether a person tends to use the same metaphors or they vary in different situations.

Second, research can compare life stories produced in the same situation by participants that differ in several independently measured psychological characteristics (such as self-esteem or psychological well-being). This would allow finding out whether individual metaphorical styles are linked to other personality characteristics.

Third, one can look at time variation in individual metaphorical style by using longitudinal data (e.g., personal diaries and blogs spread over long time periods). This would allow finding out whether individual metaphorical styles are stable over time.

In general, we believe that metaphor is a very promising topic for further studies in personality. On the one hand, metaphor is a stable cognitive construct that characterizes individual cognitive framework and structures subjective representations of individual experiences. On the other hand, it is a product of creativity and imagination that bears rich possibilities for personality transformation and development.

Our results demonstrate both universality and variety of metaphors of personal narratives. Some conceptual metaphors described by cognitive linguistics (e.g., "*LIFE IS A CONTAINER*," "*LIFE IS A JOURNEY*," and "*EMOTION IS A PHYSICAL IMPACT*") were found in both happy and unhappy narratives. We also discovered significant differences in the usage of metaphors between the two types of narratives. Metaphors in happy stories were more numerous and diverse than in unhappy stories. The authors of happy stories demonstrated higher levels of activity, responsibility and awareness in their lives, which were reflected in metaphors of life as a "*purposeful journey*", self as an "*alive and flexible object*," and emotional states as "*internal and controlled forces*". Specific for unhappy stories were metaphors "*LIFE IS DEATH*" and "*SELF IS A DEAD OBJECT*," which demonstrate a low level of personal well-being and serve as specific markers of personal unhappiness.

We believe that these differences reflect cognitive processes which may influence emotional the well-being of a person, and that our findings can help in the diagnosis and treatment of psychological problems. Further research is needed to differentiate between the effects of

narrative situations and more stable individual style differences in the use of metaphors for conceptualization of life, self, and emotions.

The results of our study suggest that metaphors may help to construct the subjective reality of a happy or unhappy life. By telling their life stories people are able to redefine their past experiences and future perspectives. Specific metaphors may play an important part in defining subjective happiness or unhappiness.

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